Last Battle Of The 20Th Centery Essay, Research Paper

Call it the last battle of the twentieth century, or the first battle of the next millennium. But don’t short-sell the importance of the battle raging between the music performers and big record labels.

The battlefield is the Internet, and at stake is who controls the distribution of music.

In the old days, the process went like this: singer to record label to distributor to retailer to media outlet (including dance clubs) to consumer. But advances in technology create what consultants call–hold your lunch, kids–a paradigm shift.

Check it: artist to web site to consumer. Sure, the record label could have a say on this issue, but artists–including some of the more vocal critics of the music industry–have started distributing music through this process.

The technology breakthrough is called MP3/MP4. For those of you who just said “huh?” here’s a quick primer: Moving Picture Expert Group Audio Layer 3, or MP3, is an open format that allows Internet users to download CD-quality audio clips. MP3 is an exceptional piece of work because its nearest competitor, RealAudio, is not nearly as clear-sounding.

In order to play music using MP3, you need to download an MP3 player to “plug-in” to your operating system. Approximately five million of these players have been downloaded. MP4 is now available, and it allows for further compression so the files can be e-mailed.

MP3, MP4, and the next generation of fat-pipe ware will fundamentally change how music is distributed to the masses.

In a March 1999 interview with Wired magazine, Public Enemy frontman Chuck D laid out his assault on the music industry via MP3. His record label, Def Jam, a subsidiary of Polygram, sat on the release of Bring the Noise 2000 from March 1998 until Chuck D decided to release MP3 tracks from the album on Public Enemy’s web site.

The suits at Polygram had a fit and demanded that the tracks be removed from the site for fear of piracy. This is why Capital Records had the Beastie Boys remove MP3 tracks from their site. You see, MP3 tracks can be duplicated and sent out. And unlike those crappy cassette tapes you might have made of your favorite CD, MP3 tracks maintain CD quality sound after duplication.

The Recording Industry Association of America has announced plans for its own web-based project called the Secure Digital Music Initiative. It allows for downloads of music from a secure site that will decrease the possibility of piracy with password protection and other safety measures.

Record industry executives are quick to point out that most of the MP3 files available are illegally made, depriving artists of their royalties. That’s true, and no one is going to deny that piracy is an issue. But the Recording Industry Association of America’s campaign to eliminate the technology smacks of selfishness: The record industry worries about losing its power.

“Success comes from the fans first. If someone is going to pirate something of mine, I just have to make sure to do nine or ten new things,” Chuck D told Wired. Chuck D’s act of defiance will eventually be seen as mighty as the Boston Tea Party, and this is what scares the music industry most. It’s the redistribution of wealth for indie labels and artists.

“Soon you’ll see a marketplace with 500,000 independent labels. The majors can co-opt all they want, but it’s not going to stop the average person from getting into the game,” Chuck D said.

Mike Diamond, vocalist of the Beastie Boys and co-owner of Grand Royal Records, told the magazine Red Herring that the old artist-label relationship, with the artist receiving a small piece of the pie, is dying.

“Now, with this new technology, we’ll probably see a lot more relationships where artists own everything and the labels are just fulfillment partners,” Diamond said. Like Chuck D, Diamond is also less worried about the piracy issue. “I don’t think it’s impeded us from selling records,” he told Red Herring. “One format doesn’t really replace the other.”.

Small labels and artists find more freedom with MP3, but what does it mean for the consumer? According to Chuck D, it means the end of highway robbery. He says that CDs are made for eighty cents by major labels and sold to consumers for $14. “You’ll see $3 albums, which artists won’t mind if they’re getting money,” he said. “The true revenge will come when the major labels start dropping their prices.”.

What’s more, groups will be able to release their work at a faster pace without censorship and interference from the major labels. “Streaming” media technologies will allow groups to perform live without interference from broadcast networks. Mike Diamond echoes Chuck D’s enthusiasm for that idea, saying that artists can control their content and a group’s direction if you cut out the middlemen.

“We can shift direction very quickly,” Diamond said. “If the market changes radically, we don’t need a national sales force trying to make sure our records are in stores in the middle of Iowa.”.

Yes, someone in the middle of Iowa will only need to go out to the Web to find the latest in the hip-hop world.

The control that labels had as the gatekeepers of popular music is slipping away. Small labels no longer have to go hat in hand to distributors, and artists can communicate directly to their fans. It’s a nightmare for an industry that used to be able to dictate who would be big and who was too radical, too different, too free-thinking to be considered.

Still don’t think this is a big issue? In a world where it’s conceivable that media organizations can own the entire artist-to-consumer process, MP3 is as close to free expression as we are going to get.